

GRAPHITE

Navigating the Future of **Workplace Design**

*Designing for Wellbeing,
Connection, and Dedicated
Spaces in 2025 and Beyond.*

Inside this Issue -

More employees are returning to the office in varying capacities, prompting organizations to confront pressing questions. **Can the workplace truly support the countless ways we choose to work today? Can the built environment truly inspire people to do their best work, and be their best selves?** This report arrives at a pivotal moment, one marked by ongoing uncertainty around how, when, and where work takes place. Yet despite the ambiguity, one thing is clear: the workplace must evolve.

Acknowledging the complex realities of today’s work environment, this report offers actionable insights and design strategies to navigate the transition back to on-site work. By focusing on employee wellbeing, meaningful connections, and intentional creation of spaces, we explore how workplace design can foster resilience, drive engagement, and unlock the full potential of teams. In a time when the role of the office is being redefined, this report serves as a guide for organizations ready to reimagine their spaces.

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Five years since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, 2025 has seen return-to-office mandates turn from a trickle to a wave.



The pandemic fundamentally changed the way we work, introducing unprecedented models of flexibility never before imagined. Work-from-home, hybrid, and work-from-anywhere models became the norm. Myriad economic and social challenges since the pandemic have caused priorities to shift, **with 88% of the workforce stating the meaning of success has changed for them since 2020.**³ People are reassessing their professional ambitions and have become **more exacting** when evaluating options for their place of work, with work-life balance, mental health, and flexibility now considered top priorities. Work-related stress is at an all-time high, engagement is at record lows, and individuals are increasingly looking for ways

to make work align with their new lifestyle goals.

Daily rhythms and routines have shifted significantly in recent years, driven by a **reimagining of workplace norms**. As the world of work continues to evolve, it calls for new approaches and behaviors that prioritize both individual and collective wellbeing. What was once seen as a perk is now a fundamental expectation: employees in 2025 seek environments that support their mental, emotional, and social health. At the same time, rising levels of loneliness **highlight a growing need for meaningful connection**, as opportunities for authentic interaction have declined in increasingly remote and hybrid settings.

The role of the office has evolved, it's no longer just a place to get work done. **At Graphite, we see the office as a powerful tool for driving business performance and enriching the employee experience.** We believe the new value proposition of physical office space lies in its ability to foster purposeful, high-impact environments. By identifying what works, refining what doesn't, and adapting as we learn, we can create spaces **intentionally designed to support the task at hand:** boosting productivity, wellness, innovation, and meaningful connection. A purposefully designed office, informed by the insights of the past five years, can unlock deeper collaboration and creativity. It also creates richer

opportunities for learning, mentoring, career growth, organic interaction...and yes, even joy, **inspiring people to do their best work!**

2025 is another milestone in the ongoing evolution of work, a waypoint on the journey toward collective wellbeing and a renewed sense of connection. The pages that follow offer guidance for shaping built environments to align with evolving workplace needs, focusing on wellbeing and connection to get the most out of spaces and empower people to thrive.

46% of Gen Zers in the US say they'd rather be without a job than be unhappy, compared to 28% of 40 to 58-year-olds.⁴



Graphite-designed workplace amenity space as a vibrant touchdown zone, ideal for individual work before transitioning to team collaboration or mentoring upstairs. The playful, sculptural seating enables people to work independently while still feeling part of a shared, energizing environment.

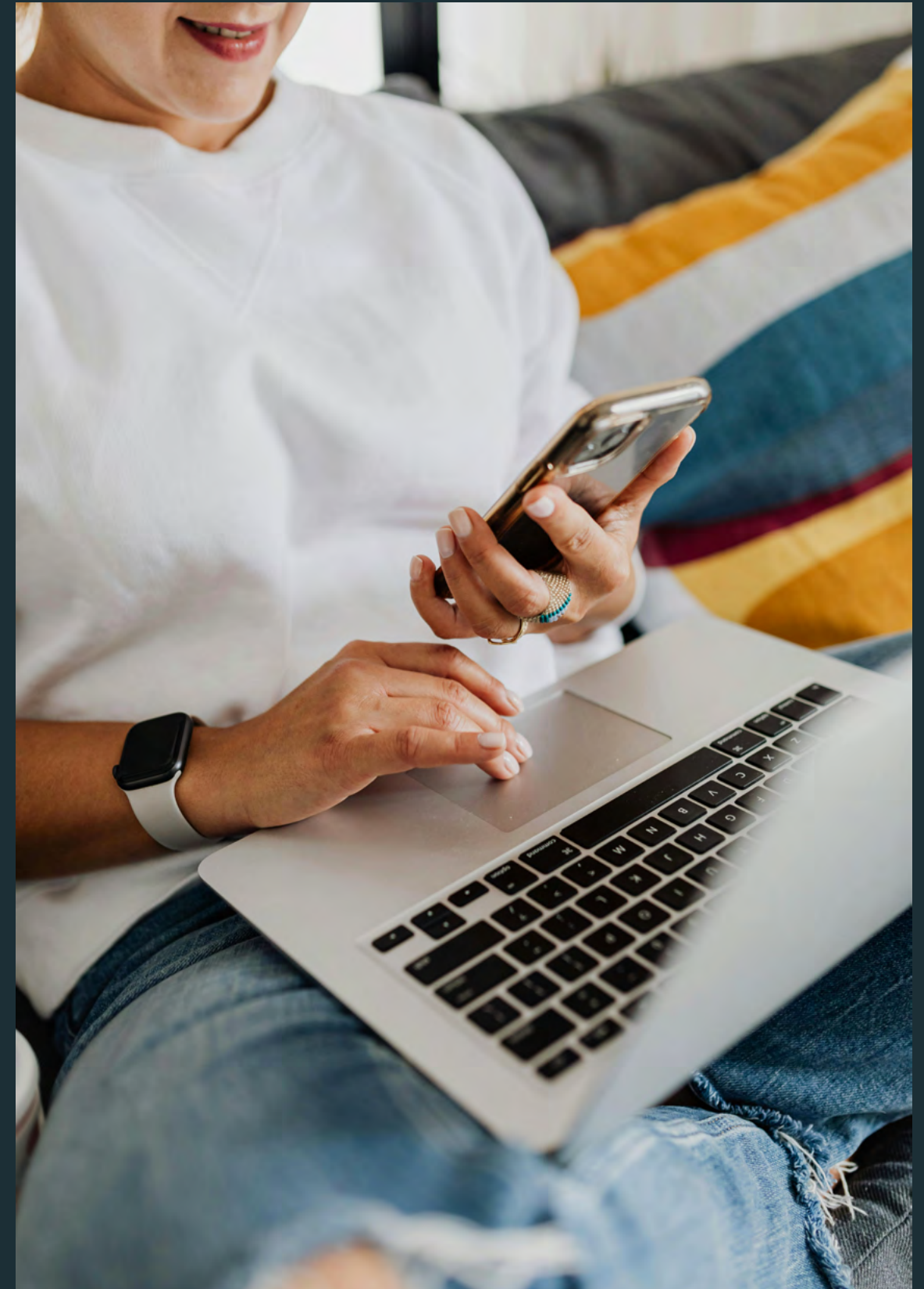
CONSTANT CONNECTIVITY

Before diving into workplace design strategies for wellbeing and connection, it's essential to understand **why** the way we work has changed so dramatically over the past five years.

We are now in an era of constant digital connectivity. The stay-at-home lockdown forced businesses to adapt overnight and integrate digital solutions to keep operations up and running. Social media and digital platforms have become stand-ins for community and culture. There is a tension now between in-person vs. virtual culture. Virtual meetings frequently take the place of in-person, spontaneous conversations, a missed opportunity for valuable personal interaction and connection. **We've moved from the unplugged, pre-smartphone era into an 'always-on' world, where being**

reachable is constant, and solitude is rare. Before 2020, ChatGPT wasn't a household name. Now, we're flooded with content, with increasingly AI-generated media, never-ending notifications, and millions of posts shared every second. These new ways in which we virtually and digitally interact have real implications for how we design spaces that foster focus, creativity, and genuine human interaction.

In 2024, 62% of employees globally were not engaged with their work, and 52% were considering looking for a new job.¹



Emerging Trends Shaping the Modern Office

DESK DILEMMA: NOT ENOUGH SPACE TO GO AROUND

Post-pandemic downsizing of office space and increased headcount have created a surprising twist: offices are running out of desks. With more employees returning full-time, workspace shortages are becoming a real pain point.

OUTDATED OFFICE LAYOUTS ARE GETTING LEFT BEHIND

Workstations designed for a pre-digital, 9-to-5 era are no longer cutting it. Today's employees need environments that support flexibility, focus, and fluid collaboration, not rows of static desks and outdated tech setups.

THE OFFICE MAKEOVER MOVEMENT

Companies are investing in major office redesigns to elevate the workplace experience and encourage greater in-office attendance. These new environments feature flexible layouts, vibrant amenities, and purpose-driven zones designed to foster collaboration and overall performance.

HOME HABITS CLASH WITH OFFICE REALITY

After years of customizing ideal at-home setups, employees are struggling to find the same balance at work. The reality of trying to focus next to a noisy communal kitchen or in a wide-open floor plan just doesn't compare to the quiet, personalized comfort of home.

THE RISE OF WORKPLACE PILOTS AND PROTOTYPES

Organizations are getting creative, testing pop-up layouts, modular furniture, and short-term pilot programs to discover what truly engages their teams. The focus? Tailoring space to culture, not just filling square footage with desks and conference rooms.

A close-up photograph of several purple crocus flowers in various stages of bloom, growing from a bed of green moss. The background is softly blurred, showing more flowers and greenery. The overall tone is natural and serene.

Designing for Wellbeing

BIOPHILIA - COLOR - PLAY

Designing for Wellbeing

Wellbeing is a cornerstone of human experience, involving emotions, ideas, and relationships. People are prioritizing and investing in wellness now more than ever before. Wellness isn't just another passing 'trend', it is now an expectation and priority, but it has always been a part of design. From ancient Roman baths to Le Corbusier's open layouts filled with natural light and fresh air, design has long been shaped around individuals' comfort and sensory experience. .

Today, workplace wellbeing has evolved beyond free lunch or providing ping pong tables. It's about how people experience their work, how meaningful it feels, how supported they are, and if they feel like they truly belong. When individuals have a clear sense of purpose, feel positive about their contributions, and share authentic connections with those around them, wellbeing thrives.⁹

Wellbeing is a key driver of organizational success. Simply put, happy workers are more productive and produce better work.¹ Jan-Emmanuel De Neve, an Oxford professor and a leading researcher on workplace wellbeing, highlights four essential drivers: belonging, trust, achievement, and compensation. **Employees want to feel that their company sees and values them, not just as workers, but as people.**

In this new era of prioritized wellness, the design of physical space plays a powerful role. **Spaces can inspire, nurture, and communicate care.** In 2025, designers and brands have a real opportunity, and responsibility, to create environments where everyone can flourish. Purposeful design practices can address rising eco-anxiety and the sense of disconnection many feel, promoting holistic wellbeing in the process. At Graphite, we have identified three considerations for designing for wellness in the workplace including **biophilia, color, and play.**

Can physical space shape behaviors and show that an organization cares about its people and their wellbeing?

BIOPHILIA

True biophilic design transcends mere aesthetics to create healthier, human-centered spaces. By integrating and layering **natural materials, daylight, greenery, and organic forms**, it offers proven psychological benefits. These elements tap into our innate **connection to nature**, reducing stress, improving mood, and enhancing cognitive function.

Designing with biophilic principles results in environments that feel more natural, habitable, restorative, and emotionally supportive. Whether in the workplace, at home, or in public spaces, biophilic design fosters a deeper sense of wellbeing and connection, making spaces feel **truly human.**



teamLAB, Floating Flower Garden

MORE THAN GREEN

Color has a powerful ability to communicate feeling, shape mood, and enhance understanding. We are heavily influenced by our surroundings and how color is used in a space. In wellness-focused and biophilic interiors, we've long seen a dominance of greens, browns, and soft neutrals in tones that relax and ground. Though natural materials and muted earthtones evoke a sense of soothing and calm, that is only one facet of wellbeing.

Holistic wellbeing includes feelings of being energized, hopeful, engaged, motivated, supported, and valued. Wellness-inspired color can also be a bold, joyful expression of creativity. When applied with intention and confidence, vibrant hues can be integrated in ways that feel both comfortable and inspiring. They spark delight, encourage curiosity, and bring an element of the unexpected, transforming environments into experiences that nurture the senses and uplift the spirit.

POWER OF PLAY

Play is a powerful antidote to the growing epidemic of hopelessness and anxiety. It triggers the release of feel-good endorphins and lowers cortisol levels offering tangible health benefits like reduced

blood pressure and stronger immunity. Beyond stress relief, **play unlocks creativity, encourages experimentation,** and gives us permission to try, fail, and try again.

In the face of ongoing global challenges, our need for mental play, joy, and optimized emotional states has never been more essential. For many adults, “play” can feel foreign or even intimidating, whether due to self-consciousness or the simple pressures of time. That's why it's vital to **normalize and encourage moments of playfulness in everyday life.**

For workplace design, creating dedicated, **serotonin-boosting spaces**, infused with laughter, whimsy, and zest, is an investment in wellbeing, creativity, and resilience.

The global market for workplace wellness is set to achieve \$60.3bn by 2028, up from \$1.8 bn in 2023.⁶

DESIGN

tips + tricks

+ Design isn't just for the eyes, it's for the fingertips too. Rough, smooth, soft, cool - layering tactile textures invites micro-interactions that soothe, offer warmth and comfort, and encourage exploration. Build in tactile moments with design elements like textured walls, woven fabrics, stone counters, or leather-wrapped railings.

+ No trees, no problem. Projection walls, ambient soundscapes, and high-res nature imagery can ground the senses and support wellbeing. Layer in organic forms, earthy colors, and textured materials to foster a deep, subconscious connection to the natural world, even indoors.

+ Art transforms walls into conversation starters. Art can spark joy, empathy, and inspiration. Whether it's bold murals, rotating local exhibits, or calming photographic landscapes, art in the workplace can offer moments of pause and opportunities for contemplation, renewal, and inspiration throughout the workday.



Graphite-designed feature staircase showcases warm wood paneling, abundant natural daylight, an energizing yellow interior, and a custom lighting arrangement that reveals a hidden cipher, creating a thoughtfully immersive transition space.

A photograph of four women of diverse ages and ethnicities sitting around a table in a creative studio. They are all smiling and have their hands stacked on top of each other on the table. The woman on the far left has short blonde hair and wears glasses and a white shirt with large blue polka dots. The woman next to her has long, curly blonde hair and is wearing a striped shirt. The woman in the middle has long dark hair and wears glasses and a light blue shirt. The woman on the far right has long dark hair and is wearing a white shirt. On the table in front of them are various items including a color palette, a spiral notebook, a pen, and a smartphone. The background features a wall with abstract art and a shelf with various objects.

Designing for Connection

GATHERING - SERENDIPITY - WONDER

Designing for Connection

Humans are inherently social beings who crave connection. Since the stay-at-home lockdowns, many have experienced a noticeable absence of in-person interaction. While technology has helped maintain communication, it often falls short of creating a true sense of belonging. According to the 2025 World Happiness Report by the University of Oxford, loneliness continues to rise and average household sizes are shrinking.² In response, there has been a renewed interest in face-to-face communities and gatherings. Book clubs, supper gatherings, and running meetups have become popular gathering points for those seeking meaningful connection post-2020.

In the workplace, the desire for connection remains. Employees value being part of something bigger than themselves and recognize the emotional and professional benefits of coming together. Creating environments that foster authentic interaction and designing spaces with intentionality can promote meaningful conversations, relationships, and a true sense of belonging. These spaces can spark collaboration, empathy, and emotional connection among individuals, teams, and even between people and their surroundings.

At Graphite, we have identified three considerations for designing for connection in the workplace including **gathering, wonder-filled moments, and serendipity.**

“How many meals you have in a week with someone else is more predictive of your wellbeing than income or employment status.”
-De Neve, University of Oxford²

GATHERING

Gathering is one of the great reasons to be at work. It's in these shared moments that emotional connections form and a true sense of community takes shape. Sharing meals, in particular, is strongly linked to higher wellbeing worldwide, yet in the United States, the number of people dining alone has risen by 53% over the past two decades. This underscores the importance of creating environments where people can come together, feel seen, and build meaningful relationships. From team lunches to casual coffee chats to after work social and athletic clubs, opportunities to connect and gather offer more than social interaction, they provide a genuine boost to mental and emotional wellbeing.



SERENDIPITY + WEAK TIES

The concepts of ‘strong ties’ and ‘weak ties’ come from the work of Stanford sociologist Mark Granovetter. Strong ties, our closest relationships, often share similar perspectives and ways of thinking. These bonds grew stronger during the pandemic, reinforcing familiar networks. While essential for support and trust, strong ties rarely challenge our thinking or spark new ideas.

Weak ties on the other hand, are the more casual, less frequent connections that cross social or professional boundaries. These are the people who bring fresh perspectives, challenge assumptions, and introduce unfamiliar ideas. **It's within these connections that innovation and opportunity are most likely to emerge**, through collaboration, contrast, and curiosity.

To foster these chance connections, design plays a critical role. Spaces that encourage spontaneous interactions, like hallways, café zones, open staircases, or shared resource areas, act as the **connective tissue** of a workplace or community. These in-between areas are where **light-touch conversations can spark big ideas**. By designing for serendipity, we create environments where diversity of thought thrives, and innovation has the space to unfold.



WONDER-FILLED MOMENTS

Wonder - the feeling of awe, admiration, and amazement sparked by the beautiful, the remarkable, or the unfamiliar - has a profound ability to connect us. In wonder-filled moments, our usual ways of thinking soften and expand, making room for new perspectives. As we encounter something vast or mysterious, we are reminded of how small we are, yet also how **deeply intertwined we are with the world around us**. Wonder fosters empathy and curiosity. It opens us to deeper understanding, not just of the world, but of ourselves and the people around

us. It shifts our sense of time and space, creating lasting impressions that linger in both mind and body.

This sense of wonder doesn't isolate, **it unites**. It connects us to nature, to beauty, to the unknown, and perhaps most importantly, to each other. When we stand in awe beneath a starlit sky, witness the intricacy of a flower, or are moved by a powerful story or work of art, we tap into a **shared human experience**. These moments strip away distraction and ego, inviting us to feel part of something larger and more meaningful than ourselves. In a world that often feels fragmented and fast-paced, cultivating moments of wonder is a powerful way to **restore connection to purpose**, to community, and to the richness of life itself.

DESIGN

tips + tricks

- + Use changes in the floorscape, such as area rugs or floor graphics, or variations in the ceiling plane to designate specific zones within the workplace. These visual cues can help define areas and indicate changes in focus without creating physical barriers.

- + Opt for elongated communal tables with rounded edges to soften boundaries and encourage informal interactions. Rounded edges remove a sense of formality and subtly invite inclusivity, making it easier for employees to join ongoing conversations or initiate new ones. Placing seating groups near heavy foot traffic can further spark spontaneous, cross-functional connection.

- + Include a living, interactive wall where employees can contribute to and engage with shared content like motivational notes, personal wins, team milestones, doodles, and daily shoutouts. This serves as a canvas to amplify your company's brand pillars through real employee voices and a lived culture.



Graphite drew inspiration from the rich, natural landscapes of the Pacific Northwest to shape this workplace experience. Treehouse-like features, such as twisting central stairs, forest-inspired materials, and biophilic touches were intentionally integrated to spark creativity, encourage spontaneous connection, and promote a greater sense of wellbeing.

Designing Dedicated Spaces

Post-pandemic habits and hybrid work models continue to reshape what employees expect from the workplace. Today, we have a deeper understanding of how people think, work, and process information. Cognition, how we take in our surroundings, interact with them, and express ideas, varies significantly across individuals. With an increasingly age-diverse and neurodiverse workforce, employees bring a wide range of values, motivators, and working styles to the table. Workplace design of today and the future must address a complex, **evolving range of human needs and experiences**. The goal is to create environments that not only enable individual and collective productivity and collaboration, but also **recognize our varying capacities for interaction**, allowing connection and wellbeing to flourish across different personality types.⁸

Designing for wellbeing and connection today goes beyond adding a meditation room or providing more collaborative seating. It is about creating **purposeful spaces which reflect the way we work today** - spaces which support physical, emotional, and social wellbeing throughout the entire week - and curating spaces which nurture meaningful human connection between colleagues, across teams, and even with the built environment itself.

This might include cozy lounge areas, communal tables, private nooks for deeper dialogue, or interactive elements that foster shared experiences. With the right mix of lighting, aesthetics, acoustics, postures, and spatial scales - tuned to the activity at hand - employees will be **better equipped to do their best work and feel good while doing it**.



Graphite Design Group, Nitro, Benschneider

Effective workplace design doesn't offer variety for variety's sake, it offers intentional, well-considered spaces designed to empower employees in the every task they take on.

Inspire workplace wellbeing and connection with dedicated spaces.

In the examples ahead, we explore how dedicated spaces, designed with intention, can bring wellbeing and connection to life. From areas for focus and rejuvenation to mentorship, creative exploration, and social gathering, these environments reflect the evolving ways we work and interact today.



Saba + Graphite Design Group, Frontier, O'Farrell



FOCUSING



COLLABORATING



RECHARGING



MENTORING



SOCIALIZING



EVENT



Dedicated Spaces -

FOCUSING

As modern workplaces increasingly prioritize collaboration, social events, and spontaneous interaction, the need for spaces that support individual focus has become increasingly essential, and ironically, harder to find. While the open office concept fosters connection, it often overlooks the crucial need for privacy and concentration. Focus doesn't necessarily require isolation or solitude. Rather, it involves creating an atmosphere that enables concentrated work, often within a shared context, a concept that may be best described as **'by myself, together.'** These focus-supportive spaces can range from small, enclosed cubbies to ambient quiet zones within shared work areas.

Employees ranked privacy as the #1 workplace need in 11 different countries.⁷



TVS, Studio O+A, Wink, Intuit Mailchimp, Seamus Payne

why this space matters - Foster deep concentration and focus, minimize distractions, and support task-oriented work through deliberate spatial and behavioral cues to maximize individual and collective productivity.



ATMOSPHERIC PRIVACY

Privacy in focus zones doesn't always mean working alone in an isolated cubby, it often means being in a quiet environment with others who are also focused. The most effective environments **blend thoughtful spatial cues with a shared understanding of behavioral norms**, like the quiet discipline of a library, where the setting itself encourages calm, uninterrupted work. This can be achieved by reducing sensory distractions and creating spaces that signal and support quiet concentration. **Visual privacy** can be established through partitions, strategic furniture layouts, or subtle shifts in color and lighting. **Acoustical privacy** might include the use of sound-absorbing materials or white noise systems to dampen disruptive sounds. Lighting design plays a key role, as soft, indirect lighting can lower stimulation, while direct task lighting provides clarity and focus. Together, these design strategies help employees mentally "tune in" while remaining connected to the broader environment.

design tip - Incorporate concave and enclosed forms such as privacy pods or semi-enclosed booths to create a sense of safety and sensory focus. Curved, cocoon-like shapes naturally signal a boundary from the surrounding environment, helping employees feel secure, grounded, and undisturbed. When integrated into open office layouts, these elements provide essential micro-environments that support individual concentration and psychological comfort.

PERSONAL EXPRESSION AND CUSTOMIZATION

People tend to do their best thinking in spaces that feel comfortable, familiar, and reflective of who they are. In the workplace, this means empowering employees to personalize their individual focus areas or 'home bases.' Whether it's pinning up family photos on a pegboard, displaying a favorite quote, or adding a small plant or meaningful object, these personal touches help foster a sense of ownership and belonging. Customizable elements like modular storage, adaptable furnishings, and interchangeable finishes support this expression of individuality while maintaining cohesion across the workspace.



Alley Poyner Macchietto, Spreetail, Dana Damewood



M Moser Associates, EY Offices, Alex Kendrick



Kinso, ESW, Eduardo Perez

DURATION-SENSITIVE DESIGN

Different tasks demand different durations of focus. For longer periods of concentrated work, ergonomic features like height-adjustable desks and supportive chairs help maintain comfort and physical health. For shorter tasks, fixed-height surfaces or quiet booths offer convenient touch-down spots where employees can immerse quickly and effectively without the need for extended setup. By aligning workspace design with the natural rhythms and demands of different tasks, organizations can help employees move seamlessly between modes of work without losing momentum.



Dedicated Spaces -

COLLABORATING

Modern offices are rapidly transforming into vibrant hubs for meaningful in-person interaction and collaboration. The benefit of a truly collaborative space will be its ability to account for, anticipate, and adapt to the diverse needs of various project teams and users. If not accounting for the varied needs of its occupant, this space can be left empty and underutilized.

To be truly effective, these spaces must deliver a seamless experience and must accommodate a wide range of working styles, from analog brainstorming to digitally connected teamwork across the globe. That means integrating intuitive technology for hybrid collaboration, ensuring access to power and connectivity, and offering adaptable furniture that supports both comfort and versatility. When designed thoughtfully, collaborative spaces not only enhance collective productivity and creativity, they also make **better use of office real estate**. As more employees return to the office specifically for team-based work, these environments become high-value assets that drive engagement, foster innovation, and justify the investment in physical space.

why this space matters - Nurture creativity and innovation by bringing together diverse users in a space designed to support a range of working styles for effortless interaction, open communication, and spontaneous idea-sharing so ideas can flow freely.



M Moser Associates+ Framery, Alex Kendrick

FLEX ON DEMAND

Collaboration thrives in dynamic environments. Equip spaces with adaptable furniture and mobile elements that can shift to support different team sizes, tasks, and energy levels. Whether it’s a quick brainstorm, a focused deep-dive, or a full-team sync, the ability to **reconfigure on the fly** boosts both creativity and efficiency, keeping collaboration responsive to the moment.



Graphite Design Group, Frontier, Benscheider

POWER OF POSTURE

Posture has a big impact on conversation. How we sit, stand, or move shapes how we think, interact, and **how our message is received by others**. Offering a range of seating options and postures empowers teams to choose environments that best support their work mode, from relaxed lounge areas for informal client debriefs to high-top huddle areas for focused discussion. The variety helps teams engage more naturally for the task at hand and get more out of their time together.



hd + vk designers, HNK, Studio de Nooyer

design tip - Use energizing colors, unexpected materials, and striking patterns to elevate mood and ignite creativity. Bold hues can carve out distinct zones, draw attention to key features, or simply breathe life into the space. A quirky wallcovering or an unconventional texture might just be the visual cue someone needs to realize that their “wild” idea is worth sharing. When the environment feels imaginative, people feel more empowered to think, and speak, freely.



Haworth, Pergola

SIGHTLINES TO SYNERGY

Prioritize porous and visibly accessible collaboration spaces, where **sightlines invite curiosity**. People are naturally drawn to environments where they can see and be seen. This visibility energizes the workplace, making collaboration feel more immediate and engaging. When work is visible and progress is shared openly, it creates a sense of **momentum and collective purpose**, reinforcing a culture of inclusion where quiet observers feel like part of the story and connected to the broader organizational vision.

While concepts of openness and transparency can guide collaborative design, the ability to shift into a closed collaboration mode is essential when confidentiality is required. Incorporate features that support both acoustic and visual privacy, such as movable partitions, acoustic treatments like soundproof booths, or adjustable smart glass, to create **temporary boundaries without disrupting spatial continuity**. These adaptable elements protect sensitive conversations, safeguard intellectual property, and foster focused teamwork, all while maintaining a culture rooted in openness.



A + I, Publicis Groupe, Magda Biernat



Dedicated Spaces -

RECHARGING

As people redefine what a successful workday looks like, there's a growing recognition that wellbeing fuels productivity. Employees not only need spaces for socialization and focus, but also environments that support decompression, reflection, and quiet restoration where they can recharge their social batteries to make the most of other moments of connection. Whether it's a sensory room, a wellness nook, or simply a quiet corner to sit and daydream, the workplace must offer safe, welcoming spaces where employees **can pause, recalibrate, and simply be.**

Embedding restorative spaces and practices into the flow of the workday not only supports emotional and cognitive recovery, but also fuels more meaningful engagement in collaborative and high-performance settings. However, effectively integrating these practices requires a cultural shift. If an employee spends time in a recharge room, **is that recognized by leadership as part of a productive day?** At home, taking a break through a walk, an Instagram scroll, or playing a video game might be a legitimate way to reset and return more focused. Yet in traditional office environments, those same behaviors are often misunderstood or overlooked. **Bridging this gap** between employee needs and employer expectations is critical to creating a truly supportive, high-performing workplace.

Behind privacy, wellness-focused spaces ranked #2 as spaces employees desired most in the workplace.⁷



Ippolito Fleitz Group, Ritter Sport Schokozentrale, Philip Kottlorz

TUNABILITY

One of the most powerful ways to support employee wellbeing is by offering **control over the immediate environment**, especially in spaces designed for rest, reflection, or rejuvenation. Offering user control over elements like lighting, color temperature, and acoustics empowers people to align the environment with how they feel in the moment, whether that means dimming the lights and finding quiet to decompress or brightening the space to reset and re-energize. This concept of personal agency, the ability to shape one's environment, has a profound impact on psychological comfort, stress reduction, and overall wellbeing and can significantly enhance the restorative value of these spaces.

SENSORIAL SOOTHING

In a world of constant stimulation, workplaces need spaces that **actively calm the senses**. Thoughtfully designed multi-sensory environments using sound, scent, touch and light to create restorative experiences can reduce stress and support deep relaxation. Elements like low lighting, tactile materials and soft textures, natural soundscapes, fidget tools, and subtle aromatherapy, offer both sensory relief and emotional comfort, creating an environment that soothes the senses and promotes lasting calm.

NOTHING NURTURES LIKE NATURE

Whether real or simulated, nature has a powerful restorative effect. Incorporating biophilic elements such as floor-to-ceiling windows with views of greenery, indoor plants, natural materials, or even projected natural imagery can **foster calm and clarity**. Gentle water features, ambient nature sounds, or subtle scents further promote a slower, more grounded rhythm and help reconnect individuals with a sense of balance.

why this space matters - Support employee wellbeing through a dedicated space for restoration, reflection, and sensory calm, empowering people to return to task-oriented work or team collaboration more grounded, focused, and ready to engage.



Graphite Design Group, Frontier, Benscheider



Pot Plus series, The New Raw



Frovi, Puffa





Dedicated Spaces -

MENTORING

Intentional environments play a powerful role in supporting both formal and informal mentoring. Whether it's seasoned professionals sharing expertise, junior employees offering fresh insights, or newer employees seeking guidance, dedicated spaces for mentoring help foster a **culture of continuous learning, skill-building, and meaningful connection**. These environments should encourage face-to-face interaction, support upskilling, and create room for honest conversations, both structured and spontaneous.

Mentoring doesn't always happen in a scheduled meeting. We often learn through **passive knowledge transfer, by osmosis, through casual observation**, side-by-side work, and organic exchanges that happen in shared environments. When spaces are designed to encourage knowledge-sharing, they transform everyday interactions into powerful learning opportunities.



Graphite Design Group, Nitro, Benschneider

DEMONSTRATION AND DIALOGUE

Provide ample room to accommodate both **active demonstrations and conversational learning**. Versatile layouts featuring movable furniture, whiteboards, and digital display tools, make it easy to shift seamlessly between explanation, discussion, and hands-on practice.



Perkins & Will, Toronto

COGNITIVE DIVERSITY

As research by thought leaders like Adam Grant and psychologists at Harvard Business School shows, people process information, solve problems, and learn in **vastly different ways**. Some thrive in motion, others through reflection, dialogue, or hands-on experimentation. Supporting this cognitive diversity means creating learning environments that are flexible and inclusive, offering both seated and standing zones, integrating untethered technology for mobility, and providing a balance of analog tools and digital resources. When employees have the **freedom to choose how they engage**, they're more likely to retain information, collaborate meaningfully, and apply what they learn in real time.



M Moser Associates, Sensetime, Seth Powers Photography



Sibling Architecture, Darebin Intercultural Centre, Peter Bennetts

VISUAL ACCESSIBILITY

Mentoring thrives on **approachability**. When mentors are tucked away behind closed doors, hard-to-access private offices, or remote corners of the workplace, opportunities for informal learning and connection can easily be lost. Instead, consider semi-private, open-door setups or shared learning zones that allow mentors to remain immersed in their work while staying open to drop-ins, collaboration, or quick teaching moments. When mentors are **out of sight, they're often out of mind**, and proximity matters for meaningful knowledge exchange.

why this space matters - Encourage employee growth and the transfer of skills and knowledge across all generations to support mutual learning and bridge both generational and experiential gaps.



Dedicated Spaces -

SOCIALIZING

In today's evolving workplace, one of the most compelling reasons to come into the office is the **opportunity to gather**, not just to work, but to connect. Unlike collaboration zones, which are goal-oriented and often structured around specific outputs, socialization spaces nurture the informal, human interactions that form the foundation of culture, trust, and belonging in a workplace. In a world of increasing digital interaction, spaces for socialization bring back the serendipity of in-person encounters and the simple joys of being together. Dedicating space for social interaction is not just a nice-to-have, it's a **strategic investment in workplace wellbeing**, employee engagement, and the relational fabric that holds teams together.

“The character of furniture, art, and finishes should spark curiosity and delight.”
-Kim Krech, Graphite Designer



Graphite Design Group, Nitro, Benschneider

YOU BELONG HERE

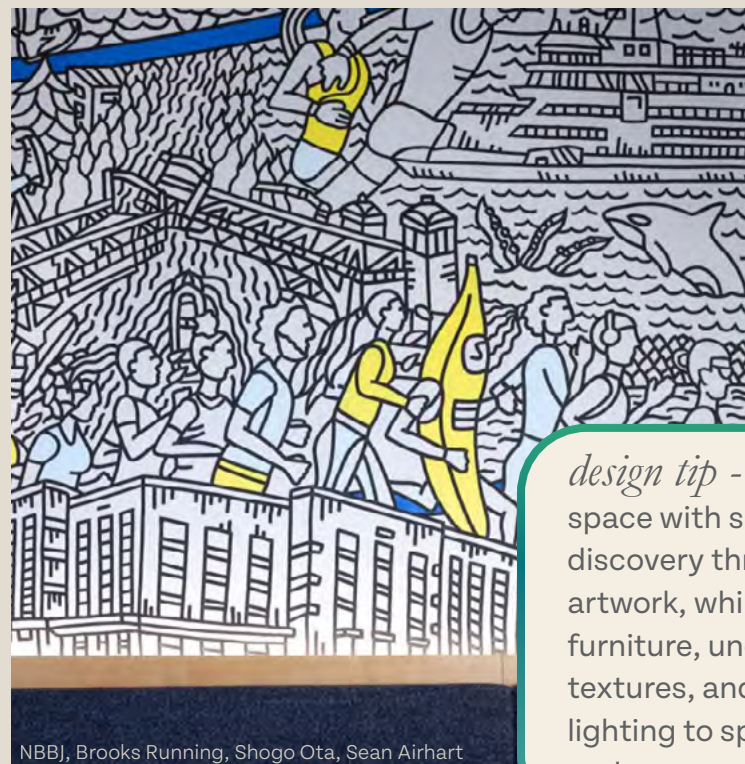
At the heart of great social spaces is a feeling of warmth, comfort, and inclusivity. Subtle, but powerful design cues of invitation, like layouts with soft, curved lines and outward-facing arrangements naturally draw people in and encourage interaction. These elements quietly communicate **you're seen, you're welcomed, you're valued, and you belong here.** When people feel emotionally safe and physically at ease, they're more likely to connect, engage authentically, and build meaningful relationships.

DESIGNING THE IN-BETWEEN

Connection doesn't always wait for a dedicated zone. Some of the most genuine interactions happen in the unscripted moments, in the spaces between spaces, like corridors, thresholds, and corners near the office coffee machine. These transitional areas can often be overlooked, but with intentional design moves, they can become **catalysts for casual connection**, sparking a quick chat, a shared laugh, or an unexpected idea. **Plan for the unplanned** by weaving in seating, greenery, playful features, and visual points of interest to activate these transitional zones and invite people to **pause, wander, and engage.**



Graphite Design Group, Frontier, Bensneider



NBBJ, Brooks Running, Shogo Ota, Sean Airhart

design tip - Infuse a space with surprise and discovery through rotating artwork, whimsical furniture, unexpected textures, and playful lighting to spark curiosity and conversation.

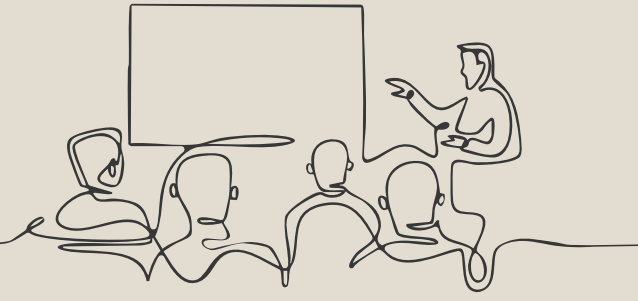


IA Interior Architects, Relish Works Offices, Hall+Merrick+McCaugherty Photographers

PATHWAYS TO PLAY

Research consistently shows that playfulness at all ages reduces stress, strengthens social bonds, and enhances imaginative thinking. In the workplace, especially within designated social spaces, playful, interactive elements invite people to engage in ways that feel light, open-ended, and **free from rigid expectations.** These unstructured moments stimulate creativity and unlock new ways of thinking and relating. Designing with play in mind using writable walls, tactile features, movable seating, and areas that invite physical interaction encourage people to engage with the space and each other. These features don't just promote interaction, they encourage movement. When people move together, whether through a walking meeting, a casual game, or a shared stretch break, these movements together **boost mood and build stronger, more resilient teams.** Rather than seeing play as a departure from work, we can see play as a **pathway toward better work, bringing people together,** restoring energy, and deepening engagement.

why this space matters - Restore human connection, foster casual interactions, and build meaningful relationships to ultimately enhance employee wellbeing, engagement, and a sense of belonging.



Dedicated Spaces - **EVENT**

As workplaces evolve into experience-driven destinations, dedicated spaces for events are becoming effective opportunities to energize an office and engage not only employees, but also external partners, clients, and the broader community. Recognizing people's renewed appetite for in-person experiences, these spaces serve as a **social hub**, a storytelling platform, and a culture carrier. They bring teams together to share knowledge, celebrate milestones, and reinforce a shared sense of purpose. These are places to **showcase company values, mission, and history**.



why this space matters - Create a sense of belonging by connecting individuals to the company's mission, culture, and story. Inspire pride, build lasting affinity, and strengthen community within and beyond workplace walls.

MAKE IT MAGNETIC

An event space should have an irresistible pull that generates excitement, sparks curiosity, creates office buzz, and makes people say, **“What’s going on in there?”** Consider layouts that invite people to **wander in and stay a while**. It should feel like the heartbeat of the office, alive with energy and possibility.



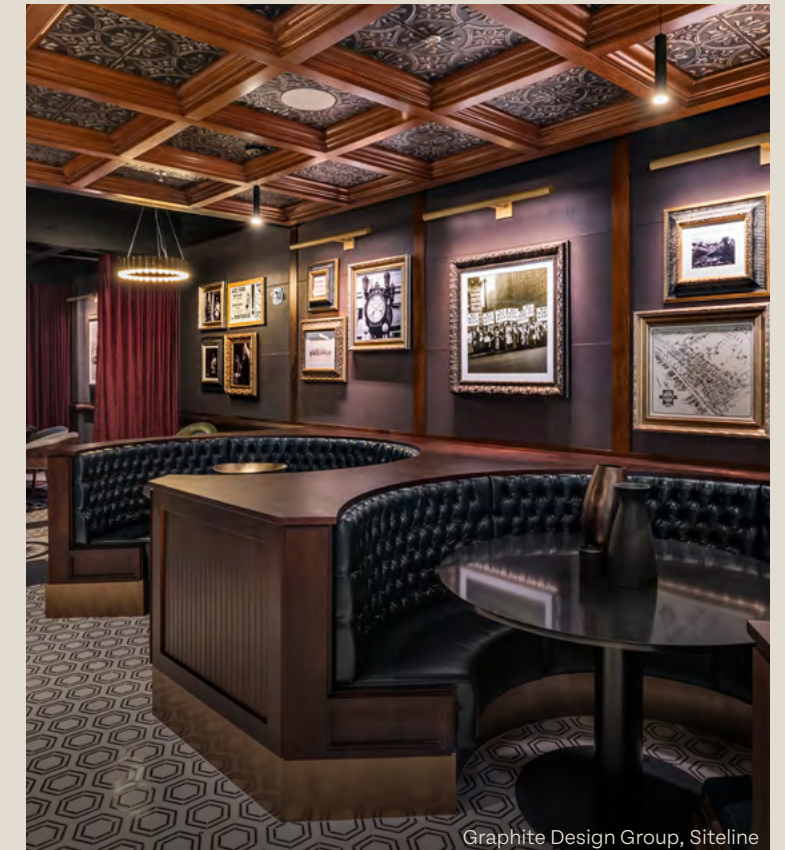
design tip - Use level changes to ensure equal sightlines and participation for all. Whether it’s a tiered seating or sunken stage, this improves functionality and adds a sense of occasion.

PAIRED PROXIMITY

Event spaces need to **scale effortlessly**, from intimate team huddles to full-house celebrations. However, spaces that are too cramped feel uncomfortable, and spaces too vast feel uneasy. The space should feel just right for the moment. Position the core of the event area near social and collaborative zones to allow for **natural expansion or containment**. This adjacency supports spontaneous overlap, easy transitions, and the flexibility to adjust on the fly.

SET THE SCENE

Atmosphere matters. Choose an aesthetic that fits your organization and the type of events you host best. Bright, airy, and inspiring, or immersive, dramatic, and theatrical? Thoughtful attention to lighting, acoustics, and materials can shape how people feel the moment they walk in, **leaving an unforgettable impression**.



High Impact, Low Cost -

(out)DATED to DEDICATED

In today's climate of economic uncertainty and cautious spending, some businesses are putting renovation projects on hold or scaling them back significantly. Yet, the same needs remain, to support workplace wellbeing, connection, and dedicated spaces for the work we do today. How can organizations **dynamically refresh their workspaces** without major capital investment? Even without the resources to embark on a full remodel, consider engaging workplace designers to review, evaluate, and suggest simple changes involving placement, paint, accessories, art, and access to a variety of support spaces.



Studio Edwards, Today Design, Peter Bennetts

REARRANGE FOR IMPACT

Thoughtful reconfiguration of existing furniture can have a significant impact on how a workspace supports different workstyles. By tailoring areas to specific needs, spaces can become more intuitive, effective, and energized without requiring major investment.

REPURPOSE UNDERUTILIZED SPACES

Underutilized corners of the office offer additional opportunity. These areas can be repurposed to bring new energy and purpose to the workplace. Informal social hubs might emerge through the addition of lightweight, movable elements like puzzles or games, encouraging spontaneous interaction. Conversely, naturally quiet zones can be enhanced for focused work or private calls with minimal interventions.



Graphite Design Group, Nitro, Benschneider

LEVERAGE THE REAL ESTATE MARKET

With office vacancy rates reaching record highs at the end of 2024, tenants are in a stronger position to negotiate favorable lease terms. Requests for privacy furniture, phone booths, or minor aesthetic upgrades can often be incorporated into lease agreements. Landlords may be more willing to offer tenant improvement allowances or rent abatements, especially when updating second-generation spaces, making it possible to achieve a functional refresh even in the absence of a dedicated capital budget.

Future Trends Graphite Anticipates

HOUSIFICATION

The comfort of working from home will permeate office design, bringing with it more personalized touches like art, greenery, and even pet-friendly policies. These elements will help create warmer, more inviting spaces that support collaboration and connection. Offices will feature casual layouts, a mix of seating options, layered textures, and curved lines, replacing the sharp edges of traditional workspaces with the softer, more nurturing feel of home.

NEIGHBORHOOD ACTIVATION

The future of the workplace is integrated, vibrant, and outward-focused, designed to engage with the surrounding community. Forward-thinking organizations will activate their buildings beyond the 9-to-5, introducing public programming, shared amenities, and inviting ground-floor spaces. By blurring the lines between office life and city life, these environments not only attract talent but also contribute to more dynamic, livable neighborhoods

RISE OF RESOURCEFUL DESIGN

As costs continue to climb and products risk becoming obsolete faster than ever, a shift toward resourceful, flexible design is emerging. Rather than relying on new purchases, organizations will embrace flexibility through creative layouts, mixed-era furnishings, and subtle enhancements of lighting, color, and art as low-cost, high-impact interventions which allow spaces to evolve organically over time.

AI AI AI

AI is rapidly changing the way we work by the day, moving beyond data accumulation toward meaningful application. It’s enabling organizations to uncover patterns, anticipate needs, and create more intentional, responsive experiences. As AI continues to evolve, it will open the door to possibilities we can’t yet fully predict, underscoring the importance of staying flexible, adaptable, and open to transformation in a future that’s still unfolding.

THE GREATEST ABILITY IS AVAILABILITY

When space is scarce or misaligned with how people actually work, productivity and engagement inevitably decline. Ensuring consistent, reliable, well-planned availability of the right kinds of spaces will emerge as a defining feature of effective, future-ready workplace design.

FOUR IS THE NEW FIVE

The four-day workweek is gaining global traction. This shift will align with evolving return-to-office policies, many of which already treat Friday as flexible or remote, and a natural transition into the weekend.

OUTDOOR WORKSPACES GAIN GROUND

Incorporating access to nature will increasingly become a key workplace priority, especially in dense urban environments. Outdoor areas like landscaped terraces, covered patios, and rooftop work zones will not only offer a change of scenery but also support mental clarity, relaxation, and informal collaboration, enhancing both employee well-being and workplace versatility.

RIGHT-SIZED SPACES OVER BIG OFFICES

The era of sprawling office footprints, or packing people tightly into floorplates, is giving way to right-sized environments tailored to modern ways of working. With digital tools reducing the need for paper storage and filing, and technology streamlining everyday tasks, workplaces can operate effectively within more purposeful layouts, making every square foot work smarter.

THE DECLINE OF HOT-DESKING

Hot-desking, also known as hoteling, will lose its shine. As employees seek greater ownership, routine, and a reflection of their personal identity in the workplace, the concept of interchangeable desks will feel increasingly impersonal. Tomorrow's workforce will look for environments that respect individuality and offer stability, moving away from an anonymous, uniform sea of sameness toward spaces that feel meaningful and purpose-driven.

RESURGENCE OF PRIVATE OFFICES

Private offices will make a comeback as companies acknowledge demands for spaces that offer visual and acoustical privacy and focus. These areas will be particularly valued for tasks requiring deep concentration, confidential discussions, or a break from open-plan distractions. Expect them to look different than before, more transparent, permeable, smaller, and integrated into collaborative ecosystems. Their return will reflect a broader recognition of the need for variety and choice within the workplace.

So, what are our takeaways?

The way people work has fundamentally changed since 2020. As the nature of work continues to evolve, so too must the environments that support it. It's about building systems that support presence, purpose, and possibility.

Today's workplaces must account for the complex and ever-changing range of human needs and experiences that make up the modern workday. From focused individual work to spontaneous collaboration and restorative breaks, each task requires the right environment to be done well. In the workplace of today and beyond, these spaces must support wellbeing and connection because great work happens when people feel seen, supported, and inspired.



Graphite Design Group, Nitro, Benschneider

THE WORKPLACE IS A SIGNAL OF VALUES

Physical space sends a powerful message about an organization's culture, it signals care, intention, and value. When employees feel their wellbeing is prioritized, engagement rises. Purposeful, people-centered environments reinforce a people-first culture by building trust, encouraging authenticity, and inviting individuals to bring their full selves to work. Just as importantly, workplace design can serve as a strategic tool for attracting and retaining top talent by demonstrating a clear commitment to the employee experience and shaping how people feel, work, and live throughout the workday.

FLEXIBILITY IS FOUNDATIONAL

In a time defined by rapid change, flexibility is a strategic imperative. Layouts should be reconfigurable, furniture movable, and spaces adaptable to meet evolving team needs and organizational goals. Intentionally unassigned zones can be repurposed as new needs emerge, allowing workplaces to stay nimble without the need for constant reinvention.

A SHIFT IN MINDSET: PRODUCTIVITY, REDEFINED

Ultimately, this moment challenges us to reconsider what productivity really looks like. Is it only measurable through visibility and output? Or does it also include emotional wellbeing, a clear sense of purpose, and flexibility to manage one's workflow effectively? When spaces are designed to support people as whole individuals, teams and work thrive. Behaviors once seen as distractions, like taking a sensory break or socializing mid-day, may in fact be what sustains long-term creativity, resilience, and performance.

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GRAPHITE DESIGN GROUP

Graphite Design Group is a Seattle-based design firm recognized for crafting people-focused integrated environments that elegantly solve complex problems. Our diverse portfolio spans office, retail, hospitality, and mixed-use typologies, serving a broad clientele from boutique retail spaces to \$400M development projects. With a team of experienced architects and designers, Graphite Design Group seamlessly blends creativity with functionality, consistently delivering bespoke designs that surpass expectations.

WANT MORE?

Contact Peter Krech for more information on *Navigating the Future of Workplace Design*.

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